

## BREEDING TAWNY OWL AND SISKIN DEFY SPRING CHILL

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Nest-recorders and survey workers routinely pass comments about breeding activities to BTO Research Biologist, *David Glue*. Here he describes the breeding events from autumn 2000/1 to spring 2001.

### CÁRABOS Y LÚGANOS REPRODUCTORES DESAFÍAN LAS HELADAS PRIMAVERALES

Buscadores de nidos y conteadores suelen pasar comentarios sobre las actividades reproductivas al biólogo investigador David Glue. Aquí describe observaciones reproductivas desde otoño 2000 a la primavera de 2001.

A mild winter and early spring heat are not necessarily the prime ingredients for high nesting success. This was clearly demonstrated for a fifth successive breeding season during 2000. Cool, damp episodes in April, recurring through into June, impaired breeding performance among insectivores, seed-eaters and waders, although Sea Eagles and Stone Curlews were among those not so badly affected (*BTO News* 231: 9; 233: 10-11).

2000 revealed some continuing range expansions for a number of species including Mediterranean Gull and Raven (southern counties), Little Egret (SW England), Dartford Warbler (East Anglia), Marsh Harrier and Woodlark (Midlands), Eider and Black Redstart (NW England) and Gadwall and Spotted Crake (Scotland). There were some intriguing nesting cases including the use of trees by Peregrines and Hen Harriers, ground sites by Little Owls and Rooks as well as welcome cases of roof-nesting by Common Tern and Oystercatcher; and the growing use of owl boxes by expanding populations of Mandarin.

### CHRISTMAS FREEZE CHECKS LATE NESTING GREBES AND DOVES

Following the lacklustre summer of 2000, nesting activity remained low key during a mild, largely frost-free autumn quarter, dogged by uncomfortable record-breaking rainfall. House Martins, Dunnocks and Greenfinches regularly raised second broods, with some Swallows, Blackbirds and Song Thrushes tending third sets of young into October. There were late cases of nests of Great Crested Grebes, Mallards, Barn Owls, Collared Doves and Stock Doves. A deep depression (951mb) that crossed central Britain during 28-30th October, with winds gusting to 60-90 knots, was on a par with the Great Storm of 1987, but damage was less severe. Even so, there was damage to nests and nest sites of Grey Herons, Cormorants, corvids and some birds of prey. Heavy snowfall on Christmas Eve with penetrating frosts (down to -12°C) effectively terminated all nesting operations. Nature bounced back quickly in the New Year with temperatures 3°C above

average. Tits, Robins and Jackdaws claimed nest sites, Golden Eagles, Ravens and woodpeckers, displayed freely. Several species were found with early eggs, including Collared Dove, Feral Pigeon, Woodpigeon, Blackbird and Song Thrush, some taking advantage of the warmer environs of built-up areas, including shopping malls, hospitals, markets and underpasses.

### PIONEER PEREGRINE AND RAVEN DEFY FEBRUARY SNOWS

During February, Britain provided the battle zone between bitterly cold, raw, continental air and moist, warmer air of Atlantic origin. Temperatures ranged from a mean daily maximum of just 3.2°C at Aviemore, to 10.2°C on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, with associated blizzards in the north or torrential rain in the south. Wetland Bird Survey monthly record high counts for Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Pintail, Shoveler, Gadwall and Black-tailed Godwit all fell. Heavy rainfall, notably in the first half, compounded surface flooding, with Kent, Sussex, Somerset, the Severn complex, Thames corridor, York and the Borders hardest hit. The wettest six month period (September–February) on record created fresh wetlands, which were exploited by Bitterns, dabbling ducks, waders and Water Rails. Glorious sunshine on St Valentine's Day, part of a drier fortnight mid-month, saw auks, Shelducks, Lapwings and Ringed Plovers all back on their breeding grounds and displaying, if only temporarily. Large swathes of southern Britain enjoyed daily temperatures 1.5°C above average, topping with a balmy 15°C at Penzance on 21st, although it still remained the coolest February overall since 1996. By the month's end, there were reports of 10 species with active nests holding eggs or young, including Great Crested Grebes (Berks), Peregrine (Gwynedd) and Raven (Denbigh), but this was just half the total species at the same stage the previous year (*BTO News* 228: 5).

### WATERFOWL AND OWLS PROFIT DESPITE MIXED MARCH WEATHER

March roared in like the proverbial lion, heralding a month of weather extremes. Initially, snow blizzards in the north, with severe frosts as low as

-22°C, caused human misery and dampened nesting activity. The effects were felt as far south as the Isles of Scilly, which endured their first snow cover for a decade. A mild southwesterly airstream from 5/6th produced a rapid thaw, and temperatures rose dramatically to 12–15°C. By mid month this prompted vigorous song, nest construction and some egg-laying among grebes, Mallards, Grey Herons, Moorhens, Dunnocks and thrushes. Precautions taken in respect of the foot and mouth outbreak restricted information that would give an overall picture. Encouragingly, Tawny Owls (southeast counties, Chilterns), Long-eared Owls (Notts) and Barn Owls (Dorset) commenced clutches by the third week, fuelled by good rodent prey populations that had benefited from bumper winter beech mast. Sadly, there were only odd sightings of Snowy Owls, marking effectively a closed chapter for arguably the UK's most charismatic breeding colonist in the 20th century. Snow returned by the Vernal Equinox, this time from the south. Fortunately the chill was short-lived and by the month's end clutches had been started by Cormorants (N Wales), Woodcocks (Hants), Magpies (Essex), Long-tailed Tits (Oxon), Coots and Mistle Thrushes, though staggered egg-laying and deferred incubation were regular features.

### RED KITE AND STONE CURLEW STAR IN SPRING STOCK-TAKE

April Fool's Day presented a confused picture. Some wintering wildfowl, many thrushes and Waxwings were slow to disperse. Territory-claiming spring migrants, including Wheatears (Derbys) and Ring Ouzels (South Wales) displayed alongside lingering Redwings and Fieldfares. Red Kites scavenged in gardens and displayed at fresh sites. Hopefully this will further boost the 2000 total of some 430 breeding pairs in the UK. Stone Curlews were noted at sites in between the discrete, but expanding East Anglian and Wessex populations, which had topped 250 pairs in the last season. Many seed-eating finches and tits had been part buffered from the effects of severe winter weather by heavy tree-seed yields including alder, birch, spruce and larch. Siskin and Redpoll sang and displayed strongly in Welsh and Scottish conifer forests.

Spells of snow and severe frost in winter 2000/01 were generally of 2–5 days duration,

interspersed by relieving milder interludes and generous sunshine. Overall bird losses were not considered high, though the full picture has yet to emerge. The current winter, though, is considered one of the most severe since the damaging episodes in February 1991 and December 1995.